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ABSTRACT

The precise events that cause embarrassability (a chronic susceptibility to embarrassment) have yet to be fully understood. Some theorists argue that embarrassing circumstances cause an acute concern for the manner in which one is being evaluated by others. Other theorists argue that maladroit interaction is the only necessary cause of embarrassment. College students (N=310) provided extensive self-reports of social skill, fear of negative evaluation, self-esteem, self-consciousness, shyness, and negative affectivity. Embarrassability was substantially, positively correlated with fear of negative evaluation, motive to avoid exclusion, and approval motivation. In general, the greater one's concern was about disapproval and rejection from others, the greater one's desire was to be liked and accepted by others, and the greater one's susceptibility was to embarrassment. Generalized concerns for social-esteem were clearly related to embarrassability. However, a global measure of social skill was entirely unrelated to embarrassability. Skill at adept interaction was linked to embarrassability as well. This result clearly supports an awkward interaction model. Highly embarrassable people are particularly concerned with doing the right thing, but are less confident that they can do it, than are people who are less embarrassable. Altogether, however, concerns for social-esteem seem the stronger influence on embarrassability. The most effective intervention for ameliorating excessive embarrassability is likely to be one that reduces a person's apprehension about what others are thinking of him or her, rather than one that teaches basic social skill. (LLL)

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Predicting Susceptibility to Embarrassment: Social Skill Versus Social-Esteem

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ABSTRACT

Investigated the correlates of embarrassability, chronic susceptibility to embarrassment. Competing theoretical models suggest either that embarrassable people should be especially concerned about others' evaluations of them, or that they should lack social skills. 310 subjects provided extensive self-reports of social skill, fear of negative evaluation, self-esteem, self-consciousness, shyness, and negative affectivity. Correlation and regression analyses indicated that, compared to those of low embarrassability, highly embarrassable people are particularly concerned with doing the right thing and avoiding rejection from others, but are less confident that they can do it. The data best support a social-evaluation model of embarrassment.

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Predicting Susceptibility to Embarrassment:
Social Skill Versus Social-Esteem

The precise events that cause embarrassment have yet to be fully understood. Some theorists argue that embarrassing circumstances cause an acute concern for the manner in which one is being evaluated by others (Edelmann, 1987; Miller & Leary, in press). This "social-esteem" perspective assumes that, after a social predicament, the apprehension that one could be evaluated negatively by others causes the physical and psychological arousal that is recognized as embarrassment. By contrast, other theorists argue that maladroit interaction is the only necessary cause of embarrassment (Parrott, Sabini, & Silver, 1988; Silver, Sabini, & Parrott, 1987); their "awkward interaction" perspective holds that embarrassment results from the flustered uncertainty that follows the loss of a coherent script in interaction.

This study addressed this theoretical contest by examining the nature of embarrassability, a person's chronic susceptibility to embarrassment. People vary widely in embarrassability, with those of lower self-esteem and higher public self-consciousness reporting more intense embarrassments (Edelmann, 1987). If the awkward interaction model is correct, one's social skill should also substantially influence one's embarrassability; not only should skillful people more often avoid potential predicaments, their adroit adeptness should enable them to better overcome any difficulties that do occur. On the other hand, if a social-esteem model is correct, embarrassability should be more highly related to one's concern about what others are thinking; people with a high fear of negative social evaluation should be especially embarrassable. This study thus sought to determine whether social skill or social-esteem is the better predictor of embarrassability.

Subjects and Method. Two hundred female and 110 male undergraduate psychology students participated voluntarily. In large group sessions, each of them completed:

1. Modigliani's (1968) Embarrassability Scale, a measure of chronic susceptibility to embarrassment;
2. Riggio's (1986) Social Skill Inventory, which assesses six individual components of social skill including nonverbal encoding and decoding, emotional control, and behavioral adeptness;
3. Leary's (1983a) Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, a measure of one's chronic dread of disregard from others;
4. a new Motive to Avoid Exclusion Scale (Leary & Meadows, 1991) that assesses one's drive to avert social rejection;
5. the Martin-Larsen Approval Motivation Scale (Martin, 1984);
6. the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (Helmreich & Stapp, 1974), a measure of self-esteem in social situations;
7. the Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975), a measure of public and private self-consciousness;
8. the Shyness Scale (Cheek & Buss, 1981);
9. Leary's (1983b) Interaction Anxiety Scale, a measure of

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social anxiety unconfounded by behavioral responses; and

10. the PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), which taps general tendencies to experience positive and negative affect.

Once the scales were completed, the respondents were debriefed and thanked.

Results and Discussion. As Table 1 shows, embarrassability was substantially, positively correlated with fear of negative evaluation, motive to avoid exclusion, and approval motivation. In general, the greater one's concern about disapproval and rejection from others, and the greater one's desire to be liked and accepted by others, the greater one's susceptibility to embarrassment. Generalized concerns for social-esteem were clearly related to embarrassability. However, a global measure of social skill, the total score from Riggio's (1986) skill inventory, was entirely unrelated to embarrassability (r = .07).

Interestingly, this was not true of shyness and interaction anxiety. Unlike embarrassability, these social anxieties (which were nevertheless significantly correlated with embarrassability) were substantially related both to global social skill and to each of its six components. Embarrassability was meaningfully related to three individual skills, being positively related to social sensitivity (awareness of norms governing appropriate behavior) and negatively related to emotional control (the ability to manage one's emotional displays) and social control (adept control of one's self-presentations). Real or imagined deficits in generalized social skill thus appeared to play a larger role in the etiology of shyness and interaction anxiety than in embarrassability.

Indeed, a multiple stepwise regression analysis showed that Riggio's (1986) global social skill score did not predict embarrassability. Instead, as Table 2 indicates, fear of negative evaluation was the best predictor of embarrassability, accounting for better than 20% of the variance in susceptibility to embarrassment. Respondent gender (females were more embarrassable than males), motive to avoid exclusion, and low self-esteem were also significant predictors. Moreover, with these variables in the equation, self-consciousness and negative affectivity were not significantly related to embarrassability. One's openness to embarrassment evidently depends less on one's awareness of oneself as a social object (and less on one's tendency to experience negative emotions) than on a particular kind of social dread that others are judging one poorly.

However, particular components of social skill did uniquely predict embarrassability. When Riggio's (1986) six individual skills were examined in a second regression analysis, social sensitivity replaced fear of negative evaluation as the best predictor of embarrassability. Being female, having low social control, and having a high motive to avoid exclusion were also linked to higher potential for embarrassment (Table 3). With social control in the equation, self-esteem, which was highly related to social control (r= .79), dropped out.

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At first glance, this appears to be notable support for a skill-based "awkward interaction" model of embarrassment; however, social sensitivity substantially overlapped both fear of negative evaluation (r = .79) and motive to avoid exclusion (r = .67). The data argue that highly embarrassable people are especially aware of the normative appropriateness of social behavior and are highly motivated to avoid rejection and disapproval from others. These findings support a social-esteem model of embarrassment by suggesting that concern over the disapproval that can follow violations of normative standards underlies embarrassability.

On the other hand, skill at adept interaction (i.e., "social control") is linked to embarrassability as well. The more deft one is, the less one's susceptibility to embarrassment. This result clearly supports an awkward interaction model.

Conclusions. Both the social-esteem and awkward interaction perspectives are plausible explanations of embarrassment, and both gain support from these data. Highly embarrassable people are particularly concerned with doing the right thing, but are less confident that they can do it, than are people who are less embarrassable. Altogether, however, concerns for social-esteem seem the stronger influence on embarrassability. The most effective intervention for ameliorating excessive embarrassability is likely to be one that reduces a person's apprehension about what others are thinking of him or her, rather than one that teaches basic social skill.

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Table 1

Correlations among the Scales

	Embarrassability	SocSkill	EmotExp	EmotSen	EmotCon	SocExp	SocSen	SocCon	FNE	ExMotive	AppMot	SEsteem	PrivSC	PubSC	Shyness	IntAnx	PosAff
Social Skill	-.07	1.00															
Emotional Expressivity	-.05	.63	1.00														
Emotional Sensitivity	.08	.72	.34	1.00													
Emotional Control	-.24	.32	-.23	.10	1.00												
Social Expressivity	-.13	.89	.62	.51	.15	1.00											
Social Sensitivity	.51	.12	-.01	.23	-.29	-.03	1.00										
Social Control	-.37	.70	.46	.31	.31	.69	-.44	1.00									
Fear Negative Evaluation	.47	-.02	-.11	.08	-.23	-.13	.79	-.43	1.00								
Motive Avoid Exclusion	.45	.21	.11	.25	-.21	.11	.67	-.21	.62	1.00							
Approval Motivation	.34	-.20	-.22	-.16	-.16	-.24	.59	-.48	.65	.46	1.00						
Self-Esteem	-.32	.67	.44	.40	.25	.69	-.34	.79	-.44	-.13	-.51	1.00					
Private Self-Consciousness	.23	.28	.09	.40	.00	.13	.37	-.03	.36	.27	.09	.03	1.00				
Public Self-Consciousness	.34	.17	.01	.21	-.12	.04	.63	-.17	.66	.52	.34	-.10	.48	1.00			
Shyness	.37	-.60	-.41	-.31	-.23	-.65	.39	-.75	.47	.20	.49	-.77	.16	.26	1.00		
Interaction Anxiety	.48	-.56	-.42	-.24	-.24	-.65	.51	-.79	.55	.29	.51	-.75	.08	.28	83	1.00	
Positive Affectivity	-.19	.48	.22	.39	.20	.44	-.13	.49	-.20	-.01	-.28	.59	.09	.03	-.43	-.41	1.00
Negative Affectivity	.29	-.10	.02	.01	-.24	-.13	.43	-.40	.41	.25	.29	-.37	.24	.22	.38	.43	-.25

Notes. Critical values: $r = .14$, $p < .01$; $r = .20$, $p < .001$.

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Table 2

Stepwise Multiple Regression of Global Social Skill, Gender, and Other Social Constructs on Embarrassability

Predictor	R	R^2	Beta	F	p
Fear of Negative Evaluation	.47	.22	.47	69.32	.001
Gender	.51	.27	.22	16.52	.001
Motive to Avoid Exclusion	.55	.30	.24	12.05	.001
Self-Esteem	.57	.32	-.17	7.88	.005

Table 3

Stepwise Multiple Regression of Social Skill Subscales, Gender, and other Social Constructs on Embarrassability

Predictor	R	R^2	Beta	F	p
Social Sensitivity	.51	.26	.51	88.81	.001
Gender	.55	.30	.21	14.73	.001
Social Control	.57	.32	-.18	9.34	.002
Motive to Avoid Exclusion	.59	.35	.21	9.03	.003

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